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Photographs

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Photographs

Abstract

Half brown, half leucoderma-pink, her fingers scrabbled and pulled at the edge of the paper. The two thick black sheets refused to part. Revengefully, during the years when they lay on the bare floor of the cupboard, they had secreted from themselves dark thick runnels of photograph-gum, and now they clung obstinately, edge to edge. Inside there could be precious photographs, the best photographs, photographs which held the key to some blissful day otherwise sealed from her memory forever ... her fingers began to press jerkily all over the paper, trying to find a spot where the two pages had separated.

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SHAMA FUTEHALLY

Photographs

Half brown, half leucoderma-pink, her fingers scrabbled and pulled at the edge of the paper. The two thick black sheets refused to part. Revengefully, during the years when they lay on the bare floor of the cupboard, they had secreted from themselves dark thick runnels of photograph-gum, and now they clung obstinately, edge to edge. Inside there could be precious photographs, the best photographs, photographs which held the key to some blissful day otherwise sealed from her memory forever ... her fingers began to press jerkily all over the paper, trying to find a spot where the two pages had separated.

Beside her on the thick bedspread lay three or four albums in maroon and brown leather covers, their pages held by ancient thread. Two days ago she had taken one out, without hope. And slowly, incredulously, she had become like one possessed. She found herself going to the photographs as to a love-letter. When she got out of bed at six in the morning, and again at four in the afternoon, she reached mechanically for the albums on the bureau. When not looking at the pictures, she was rocking her chair or walking to the window, over-excited. It went on till the last strained efforts to see properly under the weak bulb at night.

Now her fingers moved back to the edge of the sheet and prepared to tear, come what might. There was a crackle, then a desperate ripping. Part of a photo was torn too. But there they were, seven or eight small sepia squares, little brown jewels. She closed the album quickly, trembling with relief.

The rocking-chair had to be placed by the window. Several times that afternoon she had pulled at it, but a curved leg was caught between the two trunks that jutted out from under her bed. Now she prepared to go the whole way. With deliberate slowness she dragged her large metal spittoon to the wall. She prepared to bend, to counter the faintness and nausea that came from bending. She bent, and resignedly, without effort, pushed at a trunk. The chair was freed, and she rested her head in her hands.

It was not that she had never seen the photos before. They had, after all, always been there. But all at once they had done something new; suddenly, without warning, they had set her little dark room aflame. *She* was aflame, and in some underground way this new flaming self joined her young self, as if the intervening years had never existed.

She used always to start with the one in the top left-hand corner, trying to resist the temptation to glance rapidly at them all. Only when she had stayed long and still with it, allowed it to return as it wanted, allowed its memories to lap about her, did she move on to the next. There it was, the little thing, loyal as a child. Without asking for reward it lifted up to her her young self and her young sister. They stood on their verandah, and not a hair had changed.

The balustrades had always been thick. You could spread your palm flat on them, or you could fold your parasol, clasp the neat roll of delicious papery silk, and place it on the broad wood. At once it seemed absurd to her that she no longer expected to see a wooden balustrade. Her fingers had become used to hollow-sounding iron railings. The thought made her head swim a little, and to escape it she went on to the next photo.

He was dressed for the office. They were on a stone bench. The old Ford must be waiting somewhere. They must have just finished, all of them, their wonderful breakfast. And they must have moved out to the garden before their magnificent peon carried all the files to the Ford. What a peon he was, she thought, feeling the tears appear. This was the stone bench under the lichee trees (she could not have told why she was sure). At once the smell of it came to her, the cold early morning smell of that bench. She raised her head, bewildered, and gazed uncertainly across her little cramped room. When it became hot they would move to the verandah which looked across the flowerbeds. Those North Indian flowerbeds. Soft droopy pansies of pink and pinky-white and purple. Little snowy-white sparks of daisies, tufts of carnations, little bobbing bunches of phlox all together – huge unbelievable beds! She would watch and watch, not knowing whether she felt pleasure or pain. Abdul would bring coffee in a silver service. Sometimes her sister poured. She would sit on the horsehair sofa. Hard, prickly it was, with the stuffing coming out. You could feel the prickly horsehair, as you poked your finger into a hole at one end. Particular though she was, she felt a loyalty to that hole, and had never mended it. As the morning grew heavier and lazier, she would put her feet up and rest her head on ...

Thuddum! Her door was flung open. The servant-boy was bringing her tea. A large plastic cup and two biscuits reposed on his tin tray. She stared at him, wounded.

'Don't bang the door!' she cried out.

The boy looked at her wondering, his bony knees showing below his khaki shorts. Then his mouth set in a sulky line. With a defiant gesture he moved the cane stool forward and set the tray down on it. As it was, this was Sunday evening and he was missing the TV film because of this old woman. Then she shouted at him for nothing. He would tell his memsaab, he thought for the twentieth time. Never had he worked for such people.

The old lady was glaring at him furiously. 'Don't spill the tea,' she said viciously. 'And don't bang the door when you go out.'

He went. She stared after him, unwilling to let him go. Her mouth trembled as she bent down to pick up her cup. A sticky film had formed on the surface.

She would tell her daughter-in-law. It had begun, again it had begun churning inside her, all that she would tell her daughter-in-law. You keep this bony boy for me and he doesn't even know how to serve tea. If you go out all the time, if I'm left alone day in and day out with him, I beg of you one favour. Just one little favour. Teach him at least how to serve tea.

Tears of anger began to gather in her eyes. She picked up a biscuit and leaned back, chewing laboriously. A biscuit-coloured liquid began to dribble down her chin. If it hadn't been for his banging how much she would have enjoyed her tea. It was years since she had forgotten her tea-time and had the pleasure of being suddenly reminded. From beneath the cushion of her rocking-chair she drew out a large grey handkerchief, man-sized, and, fingers shaking violently now, wiped her mouth. Tea in dirty cups. Doors banged. Her clock not repaired. Rude servants. She knew what her daughter-in-law would say if she complained. 'I'll try and explain to him nicely,' she would say, implying – ever so gently – that in this generation they were not cruel to servants.

Not cruel to servants. Hadn't Abdul stayed with her for nearly thirty years? How he stood at the door, smart and white-clad, when they came back from tour. There was a photograph. Never would he serve the bread without delicately, lovingly, picking open the napkin. Cruel to servants. When his wife was dying, she herself had gone all the way to his village to see her, sitting conscious of her responsibility in the bullock-cart, holding an envelope of money and a newspaper parcel of fruit. All Abdul's relatives said they had never seen such a Collector's wife. He had fallen at her feet and said, 'Memsaab, you are my father and mother. By your grace we are alive.' Beautiful his face was, shining with love and faith. She had wanted to stroke his middle-aged head. The photograph had brought the moment back to her like a phrase of music which now stuck in her head. Abdul's unshaven face and the feel of the dried cowdung under her feet. The little hut crowded with his embarrassed relatives, momentarily forgetting the dying woman in the excitement of seeing the Collector's wife. When she saw the photograph, the memory had given her something like a brief happiness. But almost immediately it was spoilt, because never, after all, could all this be seen by her daughter-in-law. Never could she brandish this before Urmila. (For Rafiq had married a Hindu girl, not that she had said a word about it. She had behaved as her husband would have wished, and said not a word.)

It was one thing to be a Hindu girl. It was another to be always wearing a tika which was so much larger and redder than necessary. And then flinging a jute bag over one shoulder and rushing to the college, as if it

were the only college in the world. Nothing she did, nothing she said, could shake the confidence of Urmila and her tika and her jute bag. Would Urmila ever know – would she care to know – what it was to be a Collector's wife, one who was praised by all her staff? To have the Ford waiting punctually in the porch at ten, and a thousand things to attend to? And then, she had never liked to mention it, but so many dinners with the District Commissioner. Such friendly dinners. Would Urmila ever know, she thought helplessly, how Mr Butterworth used to ask her husband's advice?

There was the Ford, with luggage tied at the back with ropes. Her husband was at the wheel, part of his head torn off. Perhaps they were going on tour. In her present mood it seemed to her that such a Ford was the only kind of car which should exist. It was large, it was gracious, there was always a sense of spaces beyond it waiting to be driven through. That was one thing which terrified her about these photographs – the memory of the spaces. From a picture of a wide verandah, a huge colonnade, an endless lawn, she would deliberately jerk her head up and stare around her crowded little room, as if to make sure she could bear it.

Her trunks, her cane stool, her dusty bureau, the pile of newspapers collected in case they were ever needed, were now silhouettes in the deepening light. She looked with exhaustion at the lamp on the bureau, its dusty shade hanging askew. She would have to switch it on. It was all of ten feet from her rocking-chair. Beside the lamp stood her clock, the hands eternally at 5.45.

There came a little knock on the door. Urmila's knock. She felt a faint relief, thinking of the light. Now Urmila could switch it on. Urmila came in with her visiting face, which was like that of someone testing the water before taking a plunge. But today she was ready for it. With the memory of Abdul fresh in her mind, with the memory of the Commissioner's dinners, she was ready. Her daughter-in-law went mechanically to the lamp and switched it on. The old lady saw that she was wearing another one of those villagy saris which, as she had once mentioned without proffering an opinion, used to be worn in the old days only by cleaning women. Urmila sat down at the edge of the bed and did not pick up the paper.

'Well?' she said in her Bombay Hindi; it was no use trying to call it Urdu. 'How are you?'

There were so many answers. How do you expect me to be, alone for so many hours. I'm feeling ill because the tea was cold again. I am trying to recover my senses, after your boy banged the door.

But today she felt no need for all this. Because of Abdul and the Commissioner's dinner, she felt like making an effort.

'Today I had a bonus,' she said, using the English word 'bonus' to indicate good humour. 'I found some photographs of the days when your father-in-law was Collector of Lucknow.'

The younger woman leaned forward, her face softening.

'Do you want to see them?'

'Of course.'

'Look then. There is the verandah of the Collector's house. Can you tell which one is me?'

'This one, of course,' Urmila smiled. 'What beautiful old houses they were, Amma. And are these embroidered skirts like the ones you have in your cupboard?'

'The same. This one was embroidered for me by my sister. In those days we used to work an a single skirt for months.'

Urmila was clearly determined to be impressed. Not only that, she was haltingly using Urdu words. 'I know,' she said. 'We just don't have that kind of patience nowadays.'

The old lady was uncomfortable with happiness. This was better than anything that had happened for days. And the unaccustomed pleasure, the triumph of it, caused her to make a too rapid mistake.

'We had a lot of qualities which you don't have today,' she said, in a voice which proclaimed it a joke.

And then all was over. Now she heard her own remark, how it pointed back to so much which had gone before. Appalled, she saw Urmila's face changing. Her daughter-in-law was still staring at the photographs but not in the same way. Her hand came under her chin in a familiar patient gesture. Her back was a little bowed, it seemed to be loaded, with the unsaid.

Now she would go away, wiping her forehead with her sari and asking a little abruptly what her mother-in-law wanted to have cooked the next day. Very likely Rafiq would not pay her an evening visit. It seemed to her, although she never allowed herself to think it clearly, that when Urmila was angry with her, he did not. Otherwise he would barge in without knocking, throw himself onto the bed, fling his feet unabashed into her lap, and say, 'Badi-bee! How is my badi-bee?' These visits were becoming rare, because there was hardly a day now when Urmila was not angry with her. Before she found the photographs her main occupation was to wonder whether Rafiq would come.

Now Urmila was pushing the album away and getting up to go. 'Amma,' she said, strained and edgy, 'is it all right if we cook tomato curry for you tomorrow?'

The old lady nodded meekly.

'And about your clock,' Urmila went on mercilessly, 'I reminded Rafiq again this morning but he forgot.'

She dared not feel resentment. She was nervous on the subject of the clock anyway, remembering the scene she had made about it. She tried not to make scenes, she tried. But she hadn't been able to bear it when Urmila asked why it mattered to her if the clock was out of order. How does it make a difference to you, said the busy lecturer's voice, not

unkindly, what the time is?

What could she answer? It didn't matter but it was the only thing that mattered. If she need never know the time she may as well be ... At eleven she gave herself a stick of toffee from the tin in the cupboard. At two she would lie down for her rest. At four she would get up, however hard it was. She would manage to wash her face and hands, try to smooth the creases in her sari, and sit in the rocking-chair to wait for her tea. If she never knew the time, what would she do all day?

Now Urmila was at the door. She said something which she always said only from the door.

'We have to go out today, Amma. But of course the boy will be here. Keep him as long as you like. Bye-bye.'

The door clicked gently. She was left in the dusky room with the shapes of her cane stool, her newspapers, her bureau, looming around her in the dark. She no longer wanted to see the photographs. Rafiq would not poke his head in the door to say good-bye. She remained in her rocking-chair and took refuge in the rocking.

She rocked and rocked. The thought of having to stop, of having to get off the chair and to undress, to face life again, loomed before her like one of the dark shapes in her room. She stopped rocking only when she was too exhausted to push her feet against the floor any more. As the rocking became gentler, and stopped, she completely still. Slowly, she pushed herself off the chair, trying to pretend it was no movement at all. Then the unending business of getting herself to the bathroom, removing and cleaning her false teeth, dabbing at her face with water and a little soap. But it was something to do, it was a little protection, and when she was finally on her bed, the misery was naked all around her in the dark.

At two in the morning she was still restless. It was churning away, Urmila and the clock. Urmila came to her in the Collector's house and said, here is your clock, Amma. You can't do without it. Behind her Abdul waited respectfully. And her husband, her husband was smiling at her over the newspaper. She was in her four-poster bed, staring at the beams high on the ceiling. She wanted to see them properly. She propelled herself out of bed and moved jerkily to the light switch. As the dusty yellow light filled the room, she recoiled in terror. Familiar and yet unknown, the trunks, the dirty bureau, the pile of newspapers seemed like a nightmare. Where was her room? Was it 5.45? What was the time, for God's sake, where was she and what was the time?

The photographs would solve everything. She moved blindly towards the albums. Her foot caught against the curved leg of her rocking-chair. She tottered, she was falling. Abdul came running. He was holding her. He was shouting, memsaab, memsaab. What has happened? O what pain. Was Rafiq being born? Please, she would die. Her husband was stroking her forehead. If she whimpered her husband would come. A knife was going through her, Abdul's meat-knife. Then it ended.